

# Floor Planning Basics

## *10 ways to ensure your dream home truly is a dream*

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When you buy a traditional home, you rarely have the opportunity to plan all its features. Usually, you choose from a list of models, based on a process of elimination, or from the appeal of glossy brochures. Then you adapt to the home and put up with those things that don't work well.

With a custom home, choice is key. You get to create something exactly the way you want it—something that reflects your family's specific needs and situation. However, to make sure your dream home truly serves all your needs, you have to plan carefully. Otherwise, you could end up living with features you don't like or paying to make changes once construction starts, which is a costly proposition.

How do you develop a good plan? Ask yourself these 10 questions. They will help you flesh out your thoughts.

### **1) What is your lifestyle?**

Your custom home should be an extension of your life. To make sure it will be, you have to consider some questions about your lifestyle. What is the make-up of your family: adults only, adults and children, aging parents, pets? Do you prefer to live informally or more formally? Do you prefer the indoors or outdoors? How do you usually spend your evenings and weekends?

What is a normal day like—hectic and active or relaxed and more sedentary? Do you like to entertain or are you more reclusive? What hobbies does your family pursue? How might those hobbies change over time?

Your answers to these types of questions will give you important information about the feel of your home and the basic plan. For example, if you live informally, you may not wish to invest in a grand formal entrance hall, but instead focus on something like a mudroom that is more valuable to you. If you generally have hectic days, you may want to create some small, cozy rejuvenating spaces that allow you to “come down” and quickly find peace at home. And if you’re an outdoors family, you may wish to place more emphasis on exterior spaces or a sunroom than on large bedrooms.

## **2) How much space do you need?**

Too many homes have large spaces that are under-utilized and other spaces that end up being too small for the amount of activity they get. Such poorly planned spaces frustrate the home owners and waste valuable construction dollars.

To avoid this problem, make sure the number, type and size of rooms reflect the activities that take place within them.

Instead of thinking of rooms by traditional labels, such as “kitchen” and “living room,” think in terms of activities: “cooking,” “eating,” “conversation,” “homework,” “sleeping” and so on. The more specific you are, the more you can design your spaces effectively. Words like “food storage,” “food preparation,” “cooking,” “serving” and “cleaning” are better than “kitchen.”

Once you've nailed down the activities, calculate how much space each one needs. In your current house, take out a tape measure and ask yourself, "Is this space adequate for this activity, or do I need more or less?" Use specific dimensions. For example, "11 by 14 feet with a 9 foot ceiling" is more helpful than simply "154 square feet." Also consider which activities can take place within the same space. Can a loft serve as a reading area, play area and studio? Once you develop a list of spaces, add the areas together. As these reflect internal dimensions, add 15 to 20 percent to cover the thickness of walls and circulation space.

### **3) What architectural features would you like to have?**

The architectural features of your home are integral to space planning. For example, a large masonry fireplace or a large spiral staircase made from logs can take up considerable space. Start by noting all the features you are considering, including things like large kitchen windows, window seats, double shower or vaulted ceilings. Then think about the structural aspects of the home. To what extent do you envision using log beams or trusses? Do you prefer steep- or gentle-sloped roofs? Do you want dormers? What type of roof form will you use: gable, hipped, other? How would you like to finish the gable ends? Log, siding, glass?

The number and extent of features you choose can influence both your floor area and your budget.

### **4) How do you want to use your home?**

Thoughtfully organizing your spaces will turn a list of activities or rooms into a house that flows, meets the diverse needs for privacy and communion, and truly lives.

To help arrange your space, start by considering which activities require a degree of privacy and which ones are communal. Activities such as sleeping and bathing may be obvious but others such as studying, reading, arriving and leaving can be more difficult to classify. Also consider: Whether your bedrooms work best on the main floor or upstairs. Whether you want the kids' bedrooms near yours. Whether you'll need a home office and where it should be. How open you want the more formal living areas to be in relation to the kitchen. How you will deal with noise and clutter.

After you resolve these issues, draw a bubble diagram to establish where you want each activity area to be located. Each bubble, or circle, should contain the name of one of the spaces you desire. Group the bubbles according to where you'd like the rooms to be laid out. Make the bubbles different sizes to signify the sizes of the rooms.

Then when you have a shape that reflects the correct relationships, square off the bubbles to create a rough floorplan. Allow for the thickness of walls, both interior and exterior. They can add a couple of feet or more across the width and length of your home.

## **5) Where are you willing to compromise?**

When developing a plan for a custom home, it is critical to balance the size and quality you prefer with your budget. For example, you may come up with a floor area you want and the features and quality you expect, but find you can't get everything for the money you're prepared to spend. If that's the case, you have to look at your options: Do you need to reduce the floor area? Can you find additional financial resources? Are you able to reduce the features and quality in some areas?

Failure to balance size, quality and budget can lead to great disappointment, stress and costs down the road. You'll also find that letting go of some things is much easier at this stage than later when you are set on a particular plan and budget.

#### **6) How can you convey your ideas to the designer or builder?**

Gathering clippings of homes and features you like can be helpful in the design process. In addition to pointing out desired features, they help your designer or builder get an indication of the quality you expect. And most importantly, they help a designer get inside your head and serve as a reference point for further questions.

Some clients scan pictures and organize them on a CD so they're easier to transfer to anyone who may need to see them. However, when you organize yours, separate them by room, activity and feature.

#### **7) How will you fit your home to your property?**

Note the opportunities and constraints of your building site. They will include geographic factors, such as topography and vegetation; climatic factors, such as sun and wind exposure; and sensory factors, such as views and sound.

As you review these factors ask yourself: What time of day do you anticipate using various rooms? In which rooms do you want the easterly morning light or the westerly afternoon light? Where are your predominant views? If they are to the north, how will you balance your view with the harsh effects of cold north winds? How does the topography of the land influence your floor levels?

Also keep in mind how your home will impact the beauty of the site. You might want to consider locating it on the roughest part of your property, leaving the best parts untouched for outdoor use.

### **8) What will your home look like in three dimensions?**

It is very natural to think in two dimensions, with little consideration of the vertical. But this often leads people to build homes whose exterior appearance and interior relationships are unsatisfying.

To make sure that your home works in all aspects, visualize it. Close your eyes, imagine yourself in each room and be aware of how it will look and feel. What do you see in front of you? Behind you? What are the floor and ceiling like? What can see you from where you are sitting? What sounds can you hear? You may find your best design work isn't done with pen and straightedge, but on the couch with your eyes closed.

### **9) Will you use manufactured or handcrafted logs?**

Your choice of manufactured or handcrafted logs can have a great influence on your home. The size of the logs, corner systems and appearance can be very different. And the sense of scale and planning possibilities can vary greatly. Research the differences between the building systems so you can make an informed choice.

### **10) How will you deal with architects, builders and contractors?**

There's a tendency to let the professionals tell you what you want because they're the "experts." But this is your home, not theirs. Make sure they are excited about your vision and not trying to make a statement of their own—or trying to make their job easier.

While professionals can provide invaluable input, all their recommendations should be discussed thoroughly. And don't be afraid to check with other professionals if you are unsatisfied or concerned about what's recommended.

A good plan starts with good thought. Allow yourself the time to question everything about your new home: your motivation, your conditions and experience, your needs and wants, how you live and how you wish to live in the future.

With careful and thorough planning, you will be in a better position to design a wonderful home that truly meets the unique needs of you and your family.

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